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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000946

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
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P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
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PARIS FOR DNOBLES

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [SA](#)

SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT FORMATION DEADLOCKED OR DEAD END?

REF: BEIRUT 921

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

¶1. (C) Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea insisted that the most effective solution to the current political crisis would be for the Saudis to appeal to the Syrians to pressure Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun and Hizballah to break the current political deadlock. The LF leader, who traveled to Saudi Arabia recently to meet with intelligence chief Prince Muqrin and Minister of State and former Ambassador to Lebanon Abd al-Aziz Khoja, confirmed that Khoja had then shuttled into Beirut the previous weekend to meet with Prime Minister-designate Hariri. Geagea was adamant that Hariri could not back down from his refusal to meet Aoun's demand to rename Aoun's son-in-law Gebran Bassil as a minister in the next cabinet, although he feared Hariri failed to appreciate the harm the drawn-out cabinet formation process would have on the next government.

¶2. (C) Geagea dismissed discussion of Kataeb leader Gemayel's possible defection from March 14 as empty threats that were merely a ploy by Gemayel to increase the number of Kataeb ministers in the next cabinet. An increasing number of contacts question if Hariri has cornered himself. End summary and comment.

GEAGEA: TELL SYRIA TO LET THE LEBANESE MAKE THE DECISIONS

¶3. (C) Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea insisted that the easiest and most effective solution to the current political crisis would be for the Saudis to appeal to the Syrians to pressure Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun and Hizballah to break the current deadlock. Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri also was urging the Saudis to do the same, Geagea told the Ambassador and PolOff during an August 21 meeting at his home in Maarab. Geagea was wary of more direct Syrian involvement, however, and said it is crucial for the Saudis to mitigate direct Syrian interference. "Syria must let the Lebanese make the

decisions," he stressed, asking the U.S. to intercede with the Saudis on behalf of Hariri to break the current logjam.

¶14. (C) Geagea dismissed the possibility that President Michel Sleiman would possess the key to unblock the situation. "It will come from Riyadh," he assessed. He urged that the U.S. to push the Saudis to talk to Syria, "but don't let them in (to Lebanon's internal affairs)." Geagea was unsure whether Hizballah was actively directing Aoun to play the role of the spoiler. "We don't know if they are encouraging him, but for sure they are having fun with (the process)," he assessed in support of his conviction that Hizballah and Iran were satisfied with Aoun's latest antics. "They get what they want, but without consequences," he judged.

GEAGEA: HARIRI HAS FUMBLED
CABINET FORMATION

¶15. (C) Geagea reported that following his meetings in Saudi Arabia with Khoja and Saudi intelligence chief Prince Muqrin earlier this month, he was convinced that the Saudis had a plan to solve the current political deadlock, although he added he was not privy to the details. Geagea said his sense was that the Saudis did not want to be seen as asking the Syrians for their assistance. "They want to tell them, not ask," he insisted. Geagea confirmed that Saudi Minister of State and former Ambassador to Lebanon Abd al-Aziz Khoja had slipped into Beirut the previous weekend to meet with Hariri. Geagea criticized Hariri's measured response to Aoun's provocations in which Hariri underscored his constitutional

BEIRUT 00000946 002 OF 002

role as Prime Minister-designate, arguing that Hariri should have challenged Michel Aoun directly. "If you don't have the will for confrontation, then you cannot be (a part of) politics in Lebanon," he insisted.

¶16. (C) Geagea was adamant that Hariri could not back down from his refusal meet Aoun's demand to include caretaker Minister of Telecommunications Gebran Bassil in the next cabinet. "The victory or loss of Gebran Bassil will be seen as a victory or loss for either March 14 or March 8. We cannot retreat." Geagea warned the Ambassador not to be optimistic about the next government when it takes shape. "Yes, it will be better than the current government, but by how much? We are in a deadlock. A dead end." Geagea said that although he and his allies wanted Aoun to be a part of the government, the FPM leader could not be the one to dictate what that government looks like. Hariri failed to appreciate the harm a drawn-out government formation process would have on the next government, according to Geagea. "Now he's playing tough. We needed that at the beginning in the first one or two weeks, but not now." The longer it takes Hariri to form the government, Geagea believes the weaker his premiership will be.

SPURNED KATAEB SUSPENDS
MEMBERSHIP IN MARCH 14

¶17. (C) Geagea referred to fellow March 14 leader Amine Gemayel as a "pain in the ass" and dismissed Gemayel's speculation on possible defection from March 14 as empty threats that were merely a ploy by Gemayel to increase the number of Kataeb ministers in the next cabinet. Noting that March 14 SecGen Fares Souaid had proposed that the 71 members of the parliamentary majority meet, Geagea assessed that this could occur soon if Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblatt "keeps his word." Geagea believed Jumblatt would support the meeting in principle but would try to postpone. The meeting would not take place under the banner of March 14, however, because Jumblatt would not agree to it.

Geagea, who said he had been in SMS contact with Jumblatt throughout the recent crisis, was puzzled by the Druze leader's departure from the March 14 coalition, observing

that Jumblatt now has "nowhere to go."

¶18. (C) Meanwhile, Druze MP and close advisor to Walid Jumblatt Akram Shehaye suggested to PolOffs in a separate meeting that the Saudis and the Syrians had run into problems with their rapprochement after the Saudis whetted the Syrians' appetite by giving too many concessions too quickly.

As long as there is only a caretaker government in place, the government is incapable of taking any real decisions, he continued. On the other side, there is "no daylight between" Syria and Iran on Lebanon policy at the moment, he said.

COMMENT

¶19. (C) With Jumblatt and Gemayel staking out their positions, Hariri-Geagea coordination remains key to the PM-designate's efforts to move forward. Whether or not stalled Syrian-Saudi rapprochement is in fact blocking Lebanon's government formation, Khoja's repeated visits have led an increasing number of contacts to question whether Hariri will be able to form a viable government without the assistance of his Saudi patrons. Hariri has issued a statement in which he expresses hope that the Holy Month of Ramadan will be an opportunity for Lebanese to rise above the wounds of the past and urges rejection of futile media and political bickering. Michel Aoun and Syria's allies have been effective in creating doubt in many Lebanese minds, however, as to whether there is any end in sight to the cabinet formation deadlock.

SISON